

Travel groups urge action as number of overseas visitors to U.S. dips

by Dawn Gilbertson
[The Arizona Republic](#)

When travel-industry officials pitch the proposed legislation to promote the United States abroad, they point to sobering statistics such as those released Thursday by the federal government.

The U.S. Department of Commerce said the number of international visitors to the United States fell again in July and is now down 10 percent for the year compared with 2008. Spending was down even more, off nearly 17 percent.

The worldwide recession is a huge factor, of course, but the industry believes a lack of a major marketing campaign to lure international visitors is also to blame for a decline in visitation that dates back to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The country spends nothing on international travel promotion each year, compared with \$800 million at last count in the European Union, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

The trade group is lobbying hard for the Travel Promotion Act legislation and scored a victory Wednesday when the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed it. It now heads to the Senate, where an earlier version passed with no problem, as early as next week. U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Tempe, is one of more than 100 co-sponsors of the bill.

Support is strong in Arizona, where warm weather, world-class [resorts](#) and golf and the Grand Canyon combine to make tourism big business.

Last year, the state attracted more than 37 million overnight visitors who spent \$18.5 billion, according to the Arizona Office of Tourism. They directly and indirectly support 310,400 jobs.

International visitors represent just a small fraction of overall visitors, totaling 5 million in 2008, three out of four from [Mexico](#). But they are coveted, especially from overseas, because they tend to stay for a long time.

Mike Surguine, general manager of Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort & Spa and chairman of the Scottsdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, said a 10- or 12-night stay in the summer is not uncommon for visitors from [Germany](#). The average overseas visitor spends \$4,500 per visit to the United States, according to the travel association.

"I would love to see more international visitors to the greater Phoenix area," Surguine said.

If the legislation is passed and signed by President Barack Obama, an independent, non-profit Corporation for Travel Promotion will be created and run by a panel of international travel-marketing experts.

It would be a public-private partnership funded through a new \$10 fee on foreign travelers who do not already pay visa fees and contributions from businesses in the industry.

The main goal would be to lure foreign [tourists](#) with a comprehensive advertising campaign and related promotions. One of the first challenges: convince international travelers the United States welcomes them and that it isn't a hassle to get here despite the post-9/11 security requirements. Potential travelers are more concerned about treatment by U.S. immigration officials than crime or terrorism, according to the USTA, which cited a 2006 survey by the Discover America Partnership.

Mark Stanton, deputy director of the Arizona Office of Tourism, likes the educational aspect of the planned campaigns.

"It says the U.S. is open for business, that we're not as complicated as it would seem," he said.

Debbie Johnson, president of the Arizona Hotel & Lodging Association and the [Valley Hotel & Resort Association](#), expects the new international marketing efforts to be launched just as travelers are ready to start booking big vacations again.

"Now's a great time to start doing this because we'll start to see the economy recover and we'll have this in place," she said.